

African American Views of Lincoln

Overview:

Students will examine Civil War era African American perspectives on Lincoln's emancipation policies.

Materials:

Excerpt from 1861 view of Lincoln by Harriet Tubman

Excerpt from 1862 speech of John S. Rock before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society

Excerpt from 1862 Editorial by Frederick Douglass (Oct. 1862)

Resolution of African-Americans from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania – *Christian Recorder*, February 7, 1863

Excerpt from Frederick Douglass's Address at the unveiling of the *Freedman's Monument*

April 14, 1876

Illustration: "Abraham Lincoln Writing the Emancipation Proclamation" by David Gilmour Blythe, 1863

Political Cartoon: "Writing the Emancipation Proclamation" by Adalbert Johann Volck, c. 1862, 1864

Citation

Abraham Lincoln and Slavery: A Unit of Study for Grades 8-12, by Kirk Ankeney and David Vigilante, National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, copyright 1998, The Regents, University of California.

Aim/Essential Question

Does Lincoln deserve to be called the Great Emancipator?

Background Information:

There were many different opinions about Lincoln's policies towards emancipation. During his administration, Lincoln contended with an active African American public, led by Frederick Douglass who insisted that Lincoln emancipate the slaves. Lincoln was sensitive to the political realities of his day and acted cautiously, but with a firm belief that in the end he would eventually be proved right.

Objectives:

1. Students will explain the attitudes African Americans held towards Lincoln during the Civil War.
2. Students will analyze and interpret multiple arguments relative to Lincoln and his policies on emancipation.

Motivation: Lincoln wrote Horace Greeley in 1862, "My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and *is not* to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I

would also do that.” How would most African Americans of Civil War America respond to this Lincoln letter to Greeley?

Methods of Analysis: Students will use these questions as they analyze the documents that follow:

1. What was the occasion for writing the document?
2. Who is the audience for each document?
3. What is the purpose of the document?
4. What is the background of the author or speaker?
5. The groups in their written and or verbal responses must clearly indicate their position on the focus questions that will lead to a class discussion on, “Does Abraham Lincoln deserve to be called the Great Emancipator?”

Procedures:

1. Show students images of the Volck political cartoon and the Blythe illustration. Ask them to describe what they see and to determine how each artist regarded the Emancipation Proclamation.
2. Ask students to brainstorm and create a list of reasons why African Americans might have held varying attitudes towards Lincoln. Record those responses on the board.
3. Break the students into mixed-ability groups.
4. Assign a recorder for each group.
5. Provide copies of the documents and have each member of the group read the documents.
6. In group discussion each recorder will list the main idea of each document and respond to the questions above.
7. When the groups have completed the reading and recording of the information have each group report to the whole class.
8. Have the class describe the attitudes of African Americans towards Lincoln. On the board or on an overhead list similar terms that appear in each document and speculate why these terms might reappear.

Summary Questions:

1. Organize a class debate regarding whether or not Lincoln should be called, “The Great Emancipator.”

2. Ask students to consider how Lincoln might have responded to his supporters and detractors. Have the students speculate what he might hope to gain by writing a response to these individuals or groups.
3. Ask students to draw some links between the remarks of Harriet Tubman, the editorials of Frederick Douglass, and the Resolution of African Americans in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Are there any differences? Are there any similarities? If so, why?
4. Return to the images of Lincoln. Have students speculate on the differences between the two illustrations and consider what the images, taken as a pair, have to tell us about Lincoln and his attitudes towards slavery and how he is depicted in each image. What message is conveyed by comparing the two images?

Application Questions:

1. Have students create their own political cartoons about Lincoln and his administration's policies towards slavery
2. Read Lincoln's August 22, 1862 reply to Horace Greeley out loud to the students. Ask the students to write a reply from Greeley.
3. Was Lincoln a product of his time or ahead of his time? Explain.

Document A

God won't let Mr. Lincoln beat the South until he does the right thing. Mr. Lincoln is a great man, and I am a poor Negro; but this Negro can tell Mr. Lincoln how to save money and the lives of young men. He can do it by setting the Negroes free. Suppose there was an awfully big snake down on the floor. It bites you. Folks are all scared because you may die. You send for a doctor to cut the bite; but the snake, still coiled up on the floor, bites you again while the doctor treats the first bite. The doctor cuts out that bite; but while he is doing it, the snake springs up and bites you again, and so keeps biting you until you kill the snake. That is what Mr. Lincoln ought to know.

Document B

...It is not my desire, neither is it time for me, to criticize the government, even if I had the disposition to do so... While Mr. Lincoln has been more conservative than I had hoped to find him. I recognize in him an honest man, striving to redeem the country from the degradation and shame into which Mr. Buchanan and his predecessors have plunged it.

... Now it seems to me that a blind man can see that the present war is an effort to nationalize, perpetuate, and extend slavery in this country. In short, slavery is the

cause of the war: I might say, is *the* war itself. Had it not been for slavery, we should have no war!

... I do not regard this trying hour as a dark one. The war that has been waged on us for more than two centuries has opened our eyes and caused us to form alliances, so that instead of acting on the defensive, we are now prepared to attack the enemy... This rebellion for slaver means something! Out of it emancipation must spring. I do not agree with those men who see no hope in this war. There is nothing in it but hope. Our chance is onward. As it is with the sun, the clouds often obstruct his vision, but in the end we find there has been no standing still. It is true the government is but little more antislavery now than it was at the commencement of the war; but while fighting for its own existence, it has been obliged to take slavery by the throat and sooner or later, *must* choke her to death.

-- Annals of America, Vol. 9, 318

Document C

Common sense, the necessities of the war, to say nothing of the dictates of justice and humanity have at least prevailed. We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decrees... "Free forever" oh! Long enslaved millions, whose cries have so vexes the air and sky, suffer on a few more days in sorrow, the hour of your deliverance draws nigh! Oh! Ye millions of free and loyal men who have earnestly sought to free your bleeding country from the dreadful ravages of revolution an anarchy, lift up now your voices with joy and thanksgiving for freedom to the slave will come peace and safety to your country. President Lincoln has embraced I this proclamation the law of Congress passed more than six moths ago, prohibiting the employment of any part of the army and naval forces of the United States, to return fugitive slaves to their masters commanded all officers of the army and navy to respect and obey its provisions. He has still further declared his intention to urge upon the Legislature of all the slave States not in rebellion the immediate or gradual abolishment of slavery. But read the proclamation for it is the most important of any to which the president of the United States has signed his name.

The careful, and we think, the slothful deliberation which he has observed in reaching this obvious policy, is a guarantee against retraction... To recall his proclamation would only increase rebel pride, rebel sense of power and would be hailed as a direct admission of weakness on the part of the Federal Government, while it would cause heaviness of heart and depression of national enthusiasm all over the loyal North and West. No, Abraham Lincoln, will take no step backward. His word has gone out over the country and the world, giving joy and gladness to the friends of freedom and progress wherever those words are read, and he will stand by them, and carry them out to the letter..."

-- Douglass' Monthly, October 1862

Document D

Resolved, That we, the colored citizens of the city of Harrisburg, hail the 1st day of January, 1863, as a new era in our country's history – a day in which injustice and oppression were forced to flee and cower before the benign principles of justice and righteousness...

Resolved, That if our wishes had been consulted we would have preferred that the proclamation should have been general instead of partial; but we can only say to our brethren of the 'Border States,' be of good cheer – the day of deliverance draweth nigh – do not act contrary to the rules of propriety and good citizenship, for the rod of your oppressors will eventually be smitten by the omnipotence of truth – the "ark" of liberty will yet dwell within your borders and rest within your gates – the fires of freedom shall light your hill tops, and your valleys shall be made vocal with the songs of liberty...

Resolved, That we are well aware that freedom and citizenship are attended with responsibilities; and the success or failure of the proclamation depend entirely upon ourselves, as public sentiment will be influenced for or against that righteous decree, by our correct deportment and moral standing in this community.

Resolved, That although the proclamation was not made as an act of philanthropy, or as a great deed of justice due to those suffering in bonds, but simply as a war measure, still in it we recognize the hand of God; and for it we are constrained to say, roll forward the day when the American soil shall no more be polluted with that crime against God, American slavery; but all will be able to say, "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace and good will to man."

-- Christian Recorder, February 7, 1863

Document E

I have said that President Lincoln was a white man, and shared the prejudices common to his countrymen towards the colored race. Looking back to his times and to the condition of the country, we are compelled to admit that this unfriendly feeling on his part may be safely set down as one element of his wonderful success in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them, and bringing them safely through that conflict. His great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save this country from dismemberment and ruin; and second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery. To do one or the other, or both, he must have the earnest sympathy and powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen. Without this primary and essential condition to success, his efforts must have been vain and utterly fruitless. Had he put abolition before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably have driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed from genuine abolition ground, Lincoln seemed tardy cold, dull and indifferent;

but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical and determined... We have done a good work for our race today in doing honor to the memory of our friend and liberator we have been doing highest honors to ourselves and those who come after us; when now it shall be said that the colored man is soulless, that he has no appreciation of benefits or benefactors; when the foul reproach of ingratitude is hurled at us, and is attempted to scourge us beyond the range of brotherhood , we may calmly point to this great monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln.